

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 15, 2020

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Tibetan Monastic Education Challenges and Reforms

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On February 25th, 2019, the UBC Himalaya Program hosted a lecture by Khenpo Choying Dorjee at the University of British Columbia, with co-sponsorship from the Khyentse Foundation, Siddhartha's Intent, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhism and Contemporary Society, the UBC Department of Asian Studies, and the Institute of Asian Research within UBC's School of Public Policy & Global Affairs. Titled "Monasteries as Home: Facing Challenges of Modernization in Tibetan Monastic Education and Leadership," the lecture retraced a brief history of Tibetan monastic education before dwelling on the challenges that have confronted traditional Tibetan education in the modern world. These challenges, as Khenpo Choying Dorjee subsequently demonstrated, have been met with a series of reforms aimed to creatively adopt Western managerial and pedagogical tools and models. In particular, he reported on the reforms within his home monastery Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö Institute in northern India, founded by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, where Khenpo Choying Dorjee served as the abbot from 2013 to 2016. This lecture served as an invaluable opportunity for a Western university audience to glimpse into the mindset and actions of

Tibetan leaders who are actively searching for a well-rounded way to preserve their scholastic traditions in a complex modern world.



Figure 1. Khenpo Choying Dorjee, and audience. C. K. Choi Building, 1855 West Mall, V6T 1Z2 Vancouver, the University of British Columbia. February 25, 2019. Photo by James Binks /UBC Himalaya Program. Reprinted with permission

Khenpo Choying Dorjee opened the lecture by highlighting important places in the history of Tibetan education, also known as “shedra” in Tibetan. Samye Monastery, the first Buddhist monastery of Tibet, was founded in 775 and modeled its pedagogical structure after the great Indian universities such as Nalanda University. Among the imported elements were the disciplines of the so-called “Five Great Sciences,” namely, language, logic, arts and crafts, medicine, and science of spirituality. In 1071, Sangphu Neuthak Monastery was founded near Lhasa by a disciple of the great Indian master Atisha, succeeding Samye Monastery as the next great centre of learning, where a profusion of

translation projects introduced a great number of Indic texts to monastic studies. It was also at Sangphu Neuthak Monastery that the heuristic practice of debating first took root and remained an essential feature of the Tibetan scholastic tradition ever since. Another significant event was the addition of the “Ten Minor Sciences” during the thirteenth century, which complemented the Five Great Sciences with the science of grammar, poetics, metrics, drama, and lexicography.

After providing the audience with a rough picture of Tibetan monastic education over time, Khenpo Choying Dorjee ushered us into the main part of his lecture: the challenges that monastic education is facing today, as well as what has been done to address those challenges. For a Tibetan monastery, the most noticeable challenge is the declining number of its monastic members. Traditionally, monasteries served as the locus for both religious and secular education. This, however, is no longer the case, as abundant alternatives have become available, such as public education. In addition, traditional education is unconcerned with preparing students with the kind of knowledge and skills suitable for a modern society; its impractical orientation also discourages prospective young monks or nuns from joining the monastic order. But behind the pedagogy is a form of leadership, itself molded in the traditional education. Even when monastic leaders sense a vague need for change, they often lack necessary knowledge to initiate reforms.

After diagnosing the limitations of traditional education, Khenpo Choying Dorjee related some of his personal experiences that had opened his eyes to the way of educating and managing knowledge within Western universities and enterprises.

In 2011, sponsored by the Khyentse Foundation, Khenpo Choying Dorjee arrived at the University of California at Berkeley as a visiting scholar. At the suggestion of some faculty members, he attended a course on leadership and management. This fortuitous experience ac-

quainted him with Western management models. This tie with the Western knowledge of management was later cemented through a series of workshops that Khenpo Choying Dorjee participated in developing and implementing at his home institution in India as well as in Kathmandu, Nepal from 2011 to 2014. These events are now known as the Khyentse Foundation Excellence in Leadership and Management Workshop, which became possible also thanks to the auspices of the Khyentse Foundation. The workshops invited professional consultants from the U.S., the U.K., Germany, and Singapore to train Tibetan monastic leaders in key interpersonal and management skills. In the workshops, the kind of questions common in the business milieu were now transposed in the monastic context. For instance, how to listen to others? How to hold an effective meeting? How to recognize and define problems?

These experiences prepared Khenpo Choying Dorjee for eventually initiating and implementing reforms in his home monastery Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö Institute—the topic for the last part of his lecture.



Figure 2. Khenpo Choying Dorjee, and audience. C. K. Choi Building, 1855 West Mall, V6T 1Z2 Vancouver, the University of British Columbia. February 25, 2019. Photo by James Binks /UBC Himalaya Program. Reprinted with permission.

Reform started in the monastic curriculum. The traditional curriculum demands a thorough mastery of key texts. For instance, the study of the Madhyamaka philosophy relies on close reading, even memorization of five or six texts in their entirety. This approach, although thorough, entails an extended length of studies. Besides, Buddhist texts tend to overlap in content, sometimes copiously so, which could unnecessarily slow down the pace of learning. As a response, the curriculum in Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö Institute decided to either combine or delete the repetitive content. The curriculum also varies the pace of teaching in light of the difficulty of the subject matter, no longer treating all topics with indiscriminate attention. The reform is also reflected in the monastery's infrastructure. A soccer field and a basketball court were built, defying the traditional codes that monastics should re-

frain from sports. Western library science was also introduced to store, catalogue, and digitalize Tibetan texts.

Modernizing a deeply traditional pedagogy, however, comes with risks. For instance, an audience member inquired about the practice of memorization in a modernized monastery. As a response, Khenpo Choying Dorjee first lamented students' waning capacity and motivation for memorizing, but also commented that, even though memorization was no longer obligatory, it was still strongly encouraged. Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö Institute now regularly hosts memory contests and awards the winners not only with cheering applause but also financial prizes.



Figure 3. Q & A with Khenpo Choying Dorjee moderated by Prof. Tsering Shakya (Interpreter: Chulthim Gurung). (L to R): Prof. Tsering Shakya, Khenpo Choying Dorjee, Chulthim Gurung. C. K. Choi Building, 1855 West Mall, V6T 1Z2 Vancouver, the University of British Columbia. February 25, 2019. Photo by James Binks /UBC Himalaya Program. Reprinted with permission.

Khenpo Choying Dorjee exuded a keenly-felt charisma and delivered the lecture with a humorous and intimate tone. The audience was as much impressed by his shrewd and thoughtful character, as they were informed of the vibrant scene of cultural exchanges stewarded by the Khyentse Foundation. Overall, Khenpo Choying Dorjee's talk presented a promising picture of monastic reform and enabled the UBC Himlaya Program audience to better understand the ongoing transformation within Tibetan monasteries.